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"a perfect shame."

THE GHOST

By THE LATE MRS. H. G. WELLS

SHE was a girl of fourteen and she sat propped up with pillows in an old four-poster bed, coughing a little with the feverish cold that kept her there. She was tired of reading by lamplight and she lay and listened to the few sounds that she could hear, and looked into the fire. From downstairs, along the wide, rather dark, oak-panelled corridor hung with brown pictures of tremendous naval engagements exploding fiercely in their centres, up the broad stone stairs that ended in a heavy creaking, nail-studded door, there blew in to her remoteness sometimes a gust of dance music. Cousins and cousins and cousins were down there, and Uncle Timothy, as host, leading the fun. Several of them had danced into her room during the day,

and said that her illness was "a perfect shame," told her that the skating in the park was "too heavenly," and danced out again. Uncle Timothy had been as kind as kind could be. But— Downstairs, all the full cup of happiness the lonely child had looked forward to so eagerly for a month was running away like liquid gold.

She watched the flames of the big wood fire in the open grate flicker and fall. She had sometimes to clench her hands to prevent herself from crying. She had discovered—so early was she beginning to collect her little stock of feminine lore—that if you swallowed hard and rapidly as the tears gathered, you could prevent your eyes brimming over. She wished someone would come. There was a bell within her

reach, but she could think of no plausible excuse for ringing it. She wished there was more light in the room. The big fire lit it up cheerfully when the logs flared high; but when they only glowed the dark shadows crept down from the ceiling and gathered in the corners against the panelling. She turned from the scrutiny of the room to the bright-circle of light under the lamp on the table beside her, and the companionable suggestiveness of the currant jelly and spoon, grapes and lemonade, and the little pile of books and kindly fuss that shone warmly and comfortingly there. Perhaps it would not be long before Mrs. Bunting, her Uncle's housekeeper, would come in again and sit down and talk to her.

Mrs. Bunting, very probably, was more occupied than usual that evening. There were several extra guests, another house-party had motored over for the evening, and they had brought with them a romantic figure, a celebrity, no less a personage than the actor, Percival East. The girl had indeed broken down from her fortitude that afternoon when Uncle Timothy had told her of this visitor. Uncle Timothy was surprised; it was only another schoolgirl who would have understood fully what it meant to be denied by a mere cold the chance of meeting face to face that chivalrous hero of drama; another girl who had glowed at his daring, wept at his noble renunciations, been made happy, albeit enviously and vicariously, by his final embrace with the lady of his love.

"There, there, dear child," Uncle Timothy had said, patting her shoulder, and greatly distressed. "Never mind, never mind. If you can't get up I'll bring him in to see you here. I promise I will . . . But the *pull* these chaps have over you little women," he went on, half to himself. . . .

The panelling creaked. Of course, it always did in these old houses. She was of that order of apprehensive, slightly nervous people who do not believe in ghosts, but all the same hope devoutly they may never see one. Surely it was a long time since anyone had visited her; it would be hours, she supposed, before the girl who had the room next her own, into which a communicating door comfortingly led, came up to bed. If she rang, it took a minute or two before anyone reached her from the remote servants' quarters. There ought soon, she thought, to be a housemaid about the corridor outside, tidying up the bedrooms, putting coal on the fires, and making such-like companionable noises. That would be

pleasant. How bored one got in bed anyhow, and how dreadful it was, how unbearably dreadful it was, that she should be stuck in bed now, missing everything, missing every bit of the glorious glowing time that was slipping away down there. At that she had to begin swallowing her tears again.

With a sudden burst of sound, a storm of clapping and laughter, the heavy door at the foot of the big stairs swung open and closed. Footsteps came upstairs and she heard men's voices approaching. Uncle Timothy. He knocked at the door ajar.

"Come in," she cried gladly. With him was a quiet-faced, greyish-haired man of middle-age. Then Uncle had sent for the doctor after all!

"Here is another of your young worshippers, Mr. East," said Uncle Timothy.

Mr. East! She realised in a flash that she had expected him in purple brocade; powdered hair, and ruffles of fine lace. Her Uncle smiled at her disconcerted face.

"She doesn't seem to recognise you, Mr. East," said Uncle Timothy.

"Of course I do," she declared bravely, and sat up, flushed with excitement and her feverishness, bright-eyed and with ruffled hair. Indeed she began to see the stage hero she remembered and the kindly-faced man before her flow together like a composite portrait. There was the little nod of the head, there was the chin, yes! and the eyes, now she came to look at them. "Why were they all clapping you?" she asked.

"Because I had just promised to frighten them out of their wits," replied Mr. East.

"Oh! How?"

"Mr. East," said Uncle Timothy, "is going to dress up as our long-lost ghost and give us a really shuddering time of it downstairs."

"Are you?" cried the girl with all the fierce desire that only a girl can utter in her voice. "Oh! Why am I ill like this, Uncle Timothy? I'm not really ill. Can't you see I'm better? I've been in bed all day. I'm perfectly well. Can't I come down, Uncle *dear*—can't I?"

In her excitement she was half out of bed. "There, there, child," soothed Uncle Timothy, hastily smoothing the bed-clothes and trying to tuck her in.

"But *can't* I?"

"Of course, if you want to be thoroughly frightened, frightened out of your wits, mind you——" began Percival East.

"I do, I do," she cried, bouncing up and down in her bed.

"I'll come and show myself when I'm dressed up, before I go down."

"Oh, please, please," she cried back, radiantly. A private performance all to herself! "Will you be perfectly awful?" she laughed exultantly.

"As ever I can," smiled Mr. East, and turned to follow Uncle Timothy out of the room. "You know," he said, holding the door and looking back at her with mock seriousness, "I shall look rather horrid I expect. Are you sure you won't mind?"

"Mind—when it's you?" laughed the girl.

He went out of the room, shutting the door.

"Rum-ti-tum, ti-ty," she hummed gaily, and wriggled down into her bed-clothes again, straightened the sheet over her chest and prepared to wait.

She lay quietly for some time, with a smile on her face, thinking of Percival East and fitting his grave kindly face back into its various dramatic settings. She was quite satisfied with him. She began to go over in her mind in detail the last play in which she had seen him act. How splendid he had looked when he fought the duel! She couldn't imagine him gruesome, she thought. What would he do with himself?

Whatever he did, she wasn't going to be frightened. He shouldn't be able to boast that he had frightened her. Uncle Timothy would be there too, she supposed. Would he?

Footsteps went past her door outside, along the corridor, and died away. The big door at the end of the stairs opened and clanged shut.

Uncle Timothy had gone down.

She waited on.

A log, burnt through the middle to a ruddy thread, fell suddenly in two tumbling pieces on the hearth. She started at the sound. How quiet everything was. How much longer would he be, she wondered? The fire wanted making up, the pieces of wood collecting. Should she ring? But he might come in just when the servant was mending the fire, and that would spoil his entry. The fire could wait.

The room was very still, and, with the fallen fire, darker. She heard no more any sound at all from downstairs. That was because her door was shut. All day it had been open, but now the last slender link that held her to downstairs was broken.

The lamp flame gave a sudden fitful leap. Why? Was it going out? Was it?—no.

She hoped he wouldn't jump out at her,

but of course he wouldn't. Anyhow, whatever he did she wouldn't be frightened—really frightened. Forewarned is forearmed.

Was that a sound? She started up, her eyes on the door. Nothing.

But surely the door had minutely moved, it did not sit back quite so close into its frame! Perhaps it— She was sure it had moved. Yes, it *had* moved—opened an inch, and slowly, as she watched, she saw a thread of light grow between the edge of the door and its frame; grow almost imperceptibly wider, and stop.

He could never come through that? It must have yawned open of its own accord. Her heart began to beat rather quickly. She could see only the upper part of the door, the foot of her bed hid the lower third. . .

Her attention tightened. Suddenly, as suddenly as a pistol-shot, she saw that there was a figure like a dwarf near the wall, between the door and the fireplace. It was a cloaked figure, little higher than the table. How *did* he do it? It was moving slowly, very slowly, towards the fire, as if it was quite unconscious of her; it was wrapped about in a cloak that trailed, with a slouched hat on its head bent down to its shoulders. She gripped the clothes with her hands, it was so queer, so unexpected; she gave a little gasping laugh to break the tension of the silence—to show she appreciated him.

The dwarf stopped dead at the sound, and turned its face round to her.

Oh, but she was frightened! It was a dead white face, a long pointed face hunched between its shoulders; there was no colour in the eyes that stared at her! How did he do it, how *did* he do it? It was too good. She laughed again nervously, and with a clutch of terror that she could not control she saw the creature move out of the shadow and come towards her. She braced herself with all her might, she mustn't be frightened by a bit of acting—he was coming nearer, it was horrible, horrible—right up to her bed—

She flung her head beneath her bed-clothes. Whether she screamed or not she never knew.

Someone was rapping at her door, speaking cheerily. She took her head out of the clothes with a revulsion of shame at her fright. The horrible little creature was gone! Mr. East was speaking at her door. What was it he was saying? *What?*

"I'm ready now," he said. "*Shall I come in, and begin?*"



"He was coming nearer, it was horrible, horrible—right up to her bed."